

Information UPDATE



Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction/John T. Benson, State Superintendent/125 S. Webster St./P.O. Box 7841/ Madison, WI 53707-7841

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TO: District Administrators, CESA Administrators, CCDEB Administrators,
Directors of Special Education and Pupil Services, and Other Interested Parties

FROM: Michael J. Thompson, Assistant Superintendent
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SUBJECT: Questions and Answers about Expanding Service
Delivery Options for Preschoolers with Disabilities

Introduction

Over the past decade Wisconsin has seen many changes in the field of early childhood education and early childhood special education that have influenced service delivery models for all young children, including those with disabilities. Today's Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) teachers are assuming roles we did not envision when our state first mandated services to preschoolers with disabilities in 1973. Research findings and recent litigation favoring the placement of preschoolers with disabilities in integrated settings have prompted our office to share information and strategies related to this important topic. This bulletin will assist administrators, parents and teachers in designing programs and services in a way that allows all young children to be successful.

1. Do the federal regulations related to the "least restrictive environment" (LRE) apply to preschoolers with disabilities?

Yes, LRE does apply to preschoolers with disabilities. The final regulations for implementing IDEA 97 include specific language to emphasize this point. The Analysis of Comments and Changes in Attachment 1 of the Federal Register (March 12, 1999) describes this change in the federal regulations as follows:

"Language has been added to the regulation to clarify that the [LRE] requirements... apply to all preschool children with disabilities who are entitled to receive FAPE... The full continuum of alternative placements..., including integrated placement options, such as community based settings with typically developing age peers, must be available to preschool children with disabilities. The overriding rule in this section is that placement decisions for all children with disabilities, including preschool children, must be made on an individual basis."

The issue of the least restrictive environment as it applies to preschoolers has also received recent attention from the federal courts. In *Board of Education of LaGrange School District Number 105 v. Illinois State Board of Education*, the Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit found a school district in

violation of the least restrictive environment requirement when the district failed to consider alternatives to a segregated school placement for a preschooler. As rulings by the Seventh Circuit control federal courts in this state, this case is of heightened importance to LEAs in Wisconsin. See Information Update Bulletin 00.04 for a copy of this Seventh Circuit Court decision.

Bringing services to children with disabilities in settings that provide opportunities for interaction with their nondisabled peers is a philosophy supported by state and federal law. The 1998 changes in the federal placement categories for reporting 3-5 year olds with disabilities on the December 1 count also acknowledged the relevance of such age appropriate sites defined as early childhood general education settings.

2. What are the types of settings in which 3-5 year olds with disabilities receive special education and related services, as reported on the federal child count?

Bringing services to children with disabilities in settings that provide opportunities for interaction with their nondisabled peers is a philosophy supported by state and federal law. The 1998 changes in the federal placement categories for reporting 3-5 year olds with disabilities on the December 1 count acknowledge the relevance of such age appropriate sites defined as early childhood general education settings.

The federal child count requires the reporting of children with disabilities according to their category of impairment as well as the setting in which they receive their special education and related services. The settings for preschoolers are summarized below:

- *Early Childhood General Education Setting*: designed primarily for children without disabilities such as kindergarten, Head Start, formal playgroups (e.g. YMCA playgroup) and licensed day care/preschool.
- *Early Childhood Special Education Setting (ECSE)*: designed primarily for children with disabilities, includes self contained and reverse mainstreaming models (usually housed in a regular school building)
- *Early Childhood Special Education – Home*: the principle residence of the child's family or caregiver. Includes informal playgroups coordinated by parents or caregivers.
- *Early Childhood Special Education – Itinerant Services Outside the Home*: a school or other location where child receives services for 3 hours per week or less.
- *Early Childhood General Education Setting Part Time/Early Childhood Special Education Part Time*: multiple settings including one setting designed primarily for children with disabilities and one setting designed primarily for children without disabilities.
- *Early Childhood Special Education - Residential*: publicly or privately operated residential school or medical facilities (on an inpatient basis)
- *Early Childhood Special Education - Separate School*: separate public or private day school specifically designed for children with disabilities.

A complete copy of the instructions and setting descriptions can be found by clicking on “Instructions for the December 1, 1999, Federal Student Data Report (MS Word '97)” at http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/dpi/dlse/een/cc_data.html.

3. What questions should the IEP team consider as they determine the setting(s) for the delivery of services to a preschooler with a disability?

The discussion begins with these questions:

- Where does the child usually spend time during the day? Do any of these settings include typically developing age peers?
- Can the goals and objectives be addressed with the use of supplementary aids and services (special education and related service) in age appropriate settings?
- If not, what other settings for service delivery will meet the child's needs?

The recent changes to the federal regulations make it clear that LEAs which consider only one option for all 3-5 year olds, because they have "always served preschoolers in that model," is not acceptable. The requirement to provide an appropriate continuum of alternative placements applies to preschoolers as well as school age children. The needs of the child, as reflected in the IEP, should drive the decisions. The IEP team must specify the location (i.e. setting) in which services will be delivered. In instances where the preschooler will not participate in an early childhood general education setting, the IEP team will provide an explanation of the extent to which the child will not participate with nondisabled peers in an age appropriate site.

4. How can school districts support children in early childhood general education settings?

LEAs are utilizing a variety of approaches to support preschoolers with disabilities in early childhood general education settings. For example:

- Special education teachers and related service providers visit early childhood general education settings primarily to consult with on-site staff members.
- Where several children with disabilities are present in one setting (i.e. Head Start, kindergarten, child care/preschool program) an ECSE staff person may spend two or three half-day sessions per week team teaching or co-teaching in the classroom.
- Special education staff can travel to homes or other community settings to provide individual or small group programming and offer insight into how the adults on-site can integrate skills at other times.
- Programs for children with and without disabilities may be located in close proximity to allow fluid movement of staff and children between classrooms.

The type and amount of support is dictated by the needs and strengths outlined in the child's IEP. These service decisions are child-driven based upon the IEP, not based upon the disability of the child. Sometimes, more than one setting may be utilized to provide special education and related services. For example, the child may receive support in an early childhood general education setting from an early childhood special education teacher and the child may receive occupational therapy services in a public school setting. Or a child with a visual impairment may receive services in an ECSE classroom part time in addition to a visual impairment teacher providing service to that child in a general early childhood setting. Regardless of the actual strategy, collaborative communication skills and flexibility are crucial to the success of these services.

5. Can ECSE teachers team with day care/preschool, Title 1, Head Start or kindergarten teachers and/or provide other types of classroom instruction?

Yes, an ECSE staff person may team in a childcare, Head Start, Title 1, or kindergarten. The implementation of the children's IEPs must be the primary purpose for the presence of ECSE staff in the classroom. Sometimes the ECSE staff may provide instruction, in accordance with the child's IEP, to small groups within the classroom that also include non-disabled children. Federal Regulations support this practice and allow for "incidental benefit" to children who do not have disabilities. These small groups are designed to assist the child with a disability to access the general education curriculum and the content material is the result of team decision-making between special and general education staff.

Teaching arrangements designed to provide special education in early childhood general education settings involves some sharing of teaching responsibilities but does not lessen the general early childhood teacher's responsibility for the child's development in the classroom. The amount or type of shared teaching will vary based on the service delivery design. Some examples of various designs are listed in question 4 of this Bulletin. Benefits of teaching together in the same classroom will result when teachers acknowledge and share their special and general education expertise to create learning experiences that accommodate a child's needs within the daily routine or general curriculum of the early childhood general education setting.

Professional development that addresses collaborative consultation and teaching as a team is critical to developing the necessary framework for inclusive practices and the implementation of curricular strategies that respond to diversity in the classroom. Agreement on teaching approaches such as cooperative learning, developmental appropriate practices, and individualized or differentiated instruction are also important to the success of the collaboration. Many districts organize and support the involvement of the early childhood community through the district's plan for a comprehensive system of personnel development (CSPD).

6. What types of strategies can be used to provide services to young children in early childhood general education settings?

LEAs are providing supplementary aids and services or program modifications or supports in early childhood general education settings in a variety of ways:

Observation & Feedback

- Identify strategies for on-going assessment/evaluation of child's progress
- Assess the environment and routine for potential modifications
- Provide feedback regarding program modifications and expectations
- Demonstrate task analysis

Direct Classroom Instruction

- Target children for instruction in small groups
- One-to-one instruction for individual children
- Participate in team teaching or other types of co-teaching
- Assist children in generalizing skills to new or different situations and settings
- Acquire and adapt materials or specialized equipment

Consultation

Assist in organizing learning environments that promote the child's acquisition of skills
 Provide information regarding child's disability
 Help teachers or caregivers identify daily routines in which targeted skills can be acquired
 Share effective communication skills
 Share effective teaching strategies

Coordination

Assist in accessing other resources or other services for parents or providers
 Organize formal training for childcare providers, preschool/kindergarten teachers, and parents
 Coordinate a resource loan library of informational videos, parent materials, and other types of current literature
 Design or facilitate parent support/networking/involvement systems
 Transition children to school based programs (i.e. kindergarten) as appropriate
 Facilitate communication between school personnel and community based staff

Support in early childhood general education settings must be more than a token effort. Some children may require more intensive support in the initial stages of intervention. A transdisciplinary approach to communication and implementation of IEP objectives extends the impact of these supports.

7. Will a school district lose state membership aid if they serve preschoolers with disabilities per their IEPs in the home or a licensed day care/preschool?

No, the district will not lose state membership aid funding. When a district provides special education and related services for a preschooler with a disability in other community settings per their IEPs, the child is counted for membership aid on the PI 1563 Membership Report.

8. What variables should be considered when developing caseload expectations for the delivery of itinerant services in early childhood general education settings?

One strategy for providing service delivery options involves ECSE staff traveling to community or school based locations and working with a child with a disability and/or on-site staff member to implement the child's IEP. This strategy is often called itinerant service. Caseload expectations for teachers or therapists providing itinerant service will be greatly impacted by the needs of the student, the background or experience of the child's classroom teacher or caregiver, the configuration of special education staff providing the support, and the amount of time required to travel. For example, if the child's IEP indicates a need for contact with the general education teacher to provide program modifications then ECSE staff time must be configured to provide that support. If the child's general education teacher is new to serving children with disabilities the support must reflect that circumstance.

Some of the other variables discussed by the Task Force on Caseloads in Special Education regarding caseload considerations of itinerant teachers include:

- range of ages/ developmental levels of students
- multiplicity of the needs of students
- types of disabilities and level of severity
- levels of support needed
- intensity of services required per the children's IEPs
- level of consultation required across environments

- amount of preparation and planning required

9. If a district provides itinerant services to a preschooler in a licensed daycare/preschool who has been placed there by his/her parents, must the district assume all costs related to that setting?

No, the district is only responsible for providing the special education and related services identified in the child's IEP. In those cases, it is recommended that the IEP and notices regarding placement clearly state that the child will be receiving services in a licensed daycare/preschool that the parents have elected to enroll the child in. Thus, the parents are responsible for costs associated with the daycare/preschool tuition.

10. Why are licensed day care/preschool programs included as “early childhood general education settings” on the federal child count report? Why aren't these programs classified as private schools in Wisconsin?

By including community early childhood settings, such as licensed day cares/preschools under the early childhood general education setting on the federal child count report, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) recognizes the broad range of age appropriate settings for preschoolers located outside the walls of the public schools.

While IDEA recognizes private schools as potential placements for children with disabilities, it defers to each state for a definition of that term. The majority of the licensed day care/preschool settings do not meet Wisconsin's definition of a private school per Section 118.165, Wisconsin Statutes because these programs do not usually provide at least 875 hours of instruction each school year and do not offer a sequential curriculum in specific subject areas reflecting overall programming for a broader age range.

11. Under what circumstances does the IEP team develop a Services Plan rather than an IEP for a young child with a disability?

If the parents choose to place their child in a private school, such as a parochial K-6 program, the regulations on parentally placed private school children apply and a Services Plan should be developed per the district's overall plan for serving parentally placed private school children. For more information on parentally placed private school children with disabilities see DPI Bulletin #99.07 at <http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/dpi/dlsea/een/bul99-07.html>.

12. What opportunities are created for preschoolers with disabilities as LEAs expand four year old and full day five year old kindergartens in Wisconsin?

Research and public awareness of early brain development along with declining enrollments and pressure from parents have prompted many more school districts to consider half day four-year old and full day five year old kindergarten as an option they wish to offer families of young children. During these years of growth in programs for young children it is critical to provide the support and technical assistance needed so that LEAs create kindergarten programs that can accommodate the needs of a diverse population of learners, including preschoolers with disabilities. Designing general education programs in a way that allows all children to be successful will promote the inclusion of children with disabilities. Providing developmentally and individually appropriate experiences by qualified staff in environments that are specifically designed for young children are critical elements in designing inclusive programs.

Wisconsin's Early Childhood Collaborating Partners, a consortium of educators, caregivers, parents, health care providers, business people, administrators and other interested parties, has provided a forum for exploring a variety of flexible models for providing services to young children. Milwaukee and La Crosse are pioneers in their efforts to establish four and/or five year-old programs outside the walls of traditional school buildings. They are collaborating with other programs to provide 4 year old kindergarten in community early childhood settings such as licensed day cares/preschools. Partnering with these providers strengthens services for all children, including children with disabilities. Initiatives of this nature also eliminate the need for busing young children to different sites for services. More information about these models will be posted on the early childhood web page in the future: <http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/dpi/dlcl/bbfcsp/echildhm.html>.

13. What does the research tell us about appropriate class size in kindergarten settings? What additional factors should be considered when developing blended kindergarten programs?

Research indicates that restricting class size to 15 students in kindergarten through third grade does have a positive effect on student outcomes. State and national initiatives are utilizing this teacher-child ratio to increase the ability of teachers to accommodate a more diverse group of children and ensure successful educational experiences for all young children. Some school districts are exploring a variety of staffing patterns as they organize services for their youngest students. For example, some LEAs have developed a "blended" program in which a kindergarten teacher also serves the students with disabilities as their special education teacher. This type of blended kindergarten is taught by a dual certified teacher whose additional training and skills enables her/him to meet the needs of a number of students with disabilities when the total class size is appropriately low. Like all kindergarten classrooms, the blended classroom must have adequate space and appropriate room design that allows adaptations to be made with ease. LEAs developing blended kindergarten programs should not only consider the class size research for young students but should also consider the factors mentioned in response to question eight. While most school personnel and parents are striving for natural proportions of children with and without disabilities in kindergarten classes the blended kindergarten classes that are taught by an EC/ECSE certified teacher are including more children with disabilities than the typical kindergarten classroom. It is important for the group to include more children without disabilities to provide adequate opportunities for engagement with typically developing peers. CESA #4 currently has a web page that is posting surveys of the four year old kindergartens in the state so that LEAs have an avenue to share information about these new programs, including characteristics of the "blended programs." To access this site:

<http://www.cesa4.k12.wi.us/programs-services/multiage/4ksurvey/index.htm>.

14. How can a school district build the capacity to expand service delivery options for young children with disabilities?

IDEA preschool entitlement and flow-through dollars can be used to build the capacity of a community to expand service delivery options for young children with disabilities. Consider the following:

1) Relationship Building in School and Community

- assess the assets of the community to determine what settings exist that include or have the potential to include children with disabilities and/or determine what relationships need to be developed
- involve key players in the planning process, including parents of children receiving services personnel from community programs, classroom teachers, related services personnel and program administrators

- visit school classrooms or community programs to learn more about how the settings operate and incorporate this information into the plan
- create avenues for ongoing communication such as the community child find network or early childhood collaboration council which should include a broad base of parents and providers
- the early childhood council may wish to develop an early childhood scholarship fund by securing a financial commitment from local service organizations to fund slots in licensed daycare/preschools to ensure that families with limited resources have access to community programs for their children, regardless of whether or not they have a disability

2) *Public Awareness and Networking*

- provide information on the benefits to young children, their families and their communities when services to children with disabilities are provided in early childhood general education settings
- provide opportunities for community, school staff, and parents to share experiences, successes and challenges they encounter
- identify topics of concern to any of the team members and respond with timely information or resources
- secure the assistance of an ECSE Program Support Teacher, an EC or ECSE teacher trainer or others who have been helping communities in Wisconsin explore and create options for service delivery that allow all young children to be successful

3) *Creative Problem Solving and Joint-Training*

- encourage teams to discuss service options by facilitating a discussion as described in question six that examines how needs could be met in a variety of age appropriate settings
- review staffing patterns and projected enrollments to determine if sufficient staff time is available to provide itinerant services for part of the day and provide services in a more traditional center based program for the other part of the day
- jointly plan and conduct interagency in-service or workshop opportunities
- provide incentives to parents, staff and community service providers for participation in collaborative activities such as reimbursement for planning and training expenses
- explore possible incentives such as space rental fees, for community programs to “house” an ECSE class or provide ample space when one-to-one instruction by itinerant staff may be necessary

While most of these activities focus on preschoolers with disabilities, communities will have a greater chance of success when these discussions take place within the context of integrating and sustaining comprehensive services for all young children through a broad based planning group, such as an early childhood council.

15. What are some good resources to assist staff in developing services to young children with disabilities in least restrictive environments?

- The Department of Public Instruction’s early childhood web page is a good place to begin. It can be found at. <http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/dpi/dlcl/bbfcsp/echildhm.html>. This site will provide you with information, resources, and links to other web sites.
- Wisconsin Early Childhood Collaborating Partners (WECCP) represents agencies and associations working to create a blended system for early childhood care and education. You can access

information on WECCP on their website at <http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/dpi/dlcl/bbfccsp/eccopthm.html>. This site also has instructions to join their list serve.

- *Opening Doors Through Integration: An Early Childhood Resource Guide for Teachers of General and Exceptional Education Students*. CESA 1, Wisconsin, 1992, contact Marianne Smith (414) 546-3000. This resource guide assists teachers and program administrators in designing early childhood programs that meet the educational needs of all children within a framework of developmentally appropriate practices.
- *Collaboration: Because It's Good for Children & Families - A Wisconsin Resource Manual*. DPI, Quality Improvement Center for Disabilities, and CESA 5, 1999, contact Nola Larson, (608) 742-8811. This resource focuses on collaborations between Head Start and early childhood special education.

The National Early Childhood Technical Assistance System (NECTAS) has a section on their web site entitled "Keys to Inclusion" which has a wealth of information for administrators, early childhood service providers, parents and special education professionals. Their web site can be located at <http://www.nectas.unc.edu/>

Questions regarding this bulletin may be directed to Jenny Lange, Early Childhood Special Education Consultant at 608-267-9172 or Jill Haglund, Early Childhood General Education Consultant at 608-267-9625.

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This information update can also be accessed through the Internet:
<http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/dpi/dlsea/een/bulindex.html>